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THE WORK OF A PROBATION OFFICER

By JESSIE M. KEYS

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At no time has the graduate nurse found so many fields of work open before her as at this present day. The public recognize that the nurse is, because of her practical training, well fitted to enter many fields of civic and social service and may become a tremendous force in the betterment of all forms of public service, including that great field of work heretofore entirely controlled by political use and misuse. The "mixing in political things" is a comparatively new thing for women, and I think I am correct in saying that women do not want to hold positions under political control, but that, for the common good, they must and do.

The day is coming when the pupil nurse will have not only classes in materia medica, surgical technic, hospital practice, hygiene, and dietetics, but will be instructed in current events, social progress, political reform, and civic responsibility. In this paper I shall confine myself to that phase of social work with which I have been identified.

I think this paper might be styled, "A little journey into the political world."

It was a journey of four years' duration—an interesting, fascinating, and satisfactory journey—though at times very discouraging. Let me say here that the discouragements were never because of the wards of the Court, but always because of the machinery of the Court. Going to Columbus, Ohio, as Chief Probation Officer of the Juvenile Court of Franklin County, I found the work little understood; it was considered by the public purely as a political situation. Though the Judge of the Court recognized it as a distinctive social work, he was not prepared to say how it should be done, or in what way the public should be led to know it as a form of social service. But he began by putting a woman in charge, recognizing that woman, as the natural parent of children, would best understand the child as a class. And it was done in opposition to all political and party sentiment. The work in Columbus was considered as an educational and formative movement, as all good social service must be, rather than as a reformatory method.

In such a Court we had three classes with which to deal: (1) The delinquent child; (2) the dependent, a neglected child; and (3) the

class known as adults, those persons who contribute to the dependency or delinquency of the minor.

And I assure you that in Ohio it is, to quote the Holy Bible, "Woe unto that man by whom the offense cometh," for in Ohio the law is very severe, and, in Columbus, is enforced by a Judge who knows no class distinction, who shows neither fear nor favor when it is a matter of punishing the adult wrong-doer.

The nurse's training is a most valuable asset in this Juvenile Court work, and still more valuable when enriched by a few years of visiting nursing.

You can easily see how the understanding of physical defects or conditions will help. Often to recognize the physical handicap is to know why the delinquency exists—and instead of trying to correct the delinquency (a result) we treat the cause of it. Physical conditions, however, are not always the cause of delinquency. Very far from it. In the greater number of cases the social condition is in need of attention and this is a far harder department to serve. Here the experience of the visiting nurse is absolutely invaluable. People may be good officers of the Court, having had no such training and experience in the homes of the people, but I insist that the public has a right to expect more good, thorough, scientific work from the women who have had such training. A practical knowledge of homes, home-making and keeping, neighborhood conditions, nationalities, class ignorance and prejudice, child and adult labor conditions, wage scales, state laws, and city ordinances is an absolutely necessary part of the equipment for persons who are employed in an investigation and analysis of the reasons for and causes of the conditions known as delinquency and dependency of minor children and their more delinquent parents.

Add to this equipment a personal acquaintance with the teacher of every child placed on probation, and a thorough knowledge and appreciation of all agencies existing for the improvement of social conditions. And here let me say that when there is an awakening of the social spirit in the police force (as there has been in a few isolated cases), then this country will have at work a most valuable service in the prevention of wrong, and in the education of the masses.

In the personal work among children I have found my study of physiology and of physiognomy to be valuable assets, as you can easily see they might be.

I will not go into the details of the responsibility of being chief probation officer of a Court handling 1515 cases before the bench in one year. Each case must be investigated before it comes to the Judge's

bench for hearing—the school record of the child known, the family record found, and proper witnesses secured, for you know that a Juvenile Court of to-day stands for the *defense* of the child, not for his prosecution.

And when the case has been heard and the child is placed on probation, then begins an educational system, not for the child alone, but for the entire family. People say, "What do you do with these bad boys?" In the first place *bad* boys are never placed on probation. Probation is a formative educational process whereby the child who has been misled is directed so that he may recover, by his own effort, his proper citizenship. And in answer to the question as to "what we do," I reply—that depends upon the boy, his mistake, his home and social conditions (or lack of them). The thing to do first is to encourage the boy, by fair and square treatment of him, and by honest, open communication, to realize that the Court has stood by him because it believes in the possibility of his finding his balance. We go slowly in our plan of *knowing things*—knowing all about the boy, his chums, his teachers, his personal habits, his natural tendencies, his physical and mental limitations; his parents: their past and present social and physical condition; the home: its condition and moral atmosphere. All these items are of service in helping us to help the boy to help himself, which, when everything is said and done, is the very soul of the entire Juvenile Court movement, as it indeed is of every other form of social service.

Now for a few stories as illustrating my previous statement: Charles, a boy of 15, brought into the Detention Home, charged by the police department with the theft of a bicycle,—in the presence of the policeman the boy denied all knowledge of the affair. I said nothing. I ordered a bath, a good supper, and a night's rest. When I visited him in his dormitory next morning I said to him, "Now, my boy, I have come to see how you slept; but after a while I am coming in to hear your story. While I am gone I want you to remember this, that the truth is the greatest power there is, that the truth is the only thing that sets people straight with themselves and with the world, and is the *only* thing that can, or ever has, set folks free. You and God are the only folks who know about this wheel affair. I want you to think that over honestly, to look the thing fair and square in the face, and when I come back, you will be able to tell me the whole truth." And that is what he did—told it all as a brave man would, though he realized that it *must* mean a sentence to the reform school for him and the workhouse for the man who got him to steal the wheels. When the case was heard, the adult, who had contributed to the boy's delinquency, was committed to the

workhouse, but the boy, greatly to his surprise, was given a suspended sentence and placed on probation. He has not grown any wings; he has had many temptations to repeat the offense, but under the guidance of an awakened mother, and with a knowledge of the Court's service and human interest in him and belief in him, he has come into a knowledge of his better self, and has in every sense of the word "made good."

The delinquent girl is one who requires the same sort of consideration, but we find that so many of these so-called delinquent girls are poor, neglected, un-mothered little things, like moths about a candle, looking for a good time. Many of these girls come from homes with crowded quarters, where no privacy can be obtained, where the parents are careless in their private lives. How can we expect the same code of ethics and moral living? We would better reform some tenement and housing conditions to get at the trouble first hand. You will best appreciate just this point when I tell you of one case brought before the Court, which involved 13 boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 5, all found to have been guilty of improper relations. It developed in my investigation, which was a difficult task I can tell you, that one brother and sister, aged 13 and 7, slept in one bed, and in the same room with their parents, and had witnessed the married relation of said parents, and from this came all the trouble among the children. Yet when I warn parents of the necessity for the strictest privacy in such matters, they laugh at me or call me a queer old maid. Maybe, I am!

The girl who has been guilty of deliberate immoral acts is a problem very hard to help, for, as a rule, she does not want to be helped. I will tell you the story of Carrie, aged 15, who acknowledged that she had, to use her own words, "been with boys and men lots of times, ever since she was ten years old." This girl, when arrested, was at the depot about to leave the State in the company of a woman who had sent 39 girls into West Virginia, to supply sporting houses, among them being two of her own girls, ages 17 and 15. Evidence was found and the woman was convicted by a jury and sent to the workhouse for one year and is still working out her fine of one thousand dollars. The girl was placed on the probation list, and put to work. She behaved all right and has now married.

Another, age 16, who was found in a wine-room, was so intoxicated when brought into the Detention Home that we had great difficulty in saving her life. She also has made good and has married. I saw her not long ago with her year-old baby girl, and she said to me, "When that girl grows up, I'm going to know where she is; she never will make her mother's mistake." The young man who took that girl to the wine-

room and the keeper of the wine-room were given suspended sentences and paid heavy fines.

A continued prosecution of the adult has proven to be a great factor in the decrease of delinquency among minor girls.

The dependent or neglected child is one who has no parental care, one who has unfit parental care, or one who is associated with vicious or immoral persons. This definition covers, you see, any form of neglect, abuse, or poor environment.

In the past, children who had no parental care were placed in orphanages, and county children's homes, but, under the Juvenile Court system, this practice is falling into disuse. Thoughtful people are being awakened to the public duty to the child, and more and more we find the childless home opening its door to the homeless child; for we are all agreed that a foster-home is better than an institutional rearing. For example: one small boy was brought into the Detention Home (the children call it "the kids' jail") having been found in a packing case in an alley, where he had been in hiding for three days. The boy had run away from a County Children's Home, where he had spent seven out of his little span of ten years. Frightened, fearful of a return to that home and its punishment, the boy rushed behind a door and fell in a limp little heap. It took a long time to get him out, for, you see, it was not a case for force. I assured him, finally, that he need not fear, that we had never thrashed poor, dirty, hungry, motherless, little boys in our home. After a bath and a good meal, in his new suit of blue overalls and shirt, he was a most attractive, little lad. We kept that boy for three weeks, fed his poor little starved body and his equally starved little heart, and it was a delight to see the response. When we found a satisfactory place, I took him to his new home, the only real home he had ever known. He has been there for three years and is growing up enjoying his lawful heritage of God's out-of-doors and the love of good foster-parents. I saw him not long ago, for we visit all "placed-out children" regularly, and he said to me that he used to lie awake in that awful County Home and, in his own words, "Wonder if there was any God, or if He had just forgot about me."

The child who has been neglected in any way by its parents is often treated as if parentless—though the Court usually, if there seems any sign of awakening sense of responsibility, returns the children to their parents on probation for a time. The house is then visited by an officer of the Court or some volunteer officer, visited often and regularly, and reports sent into the office as to conduct of parents, condition of home, apparent care of child, etc.

This department of the work is greatly neglected in many Courts, and is an enormous, splendid field for good educational and formative social service.

The other class of dependent cases is that where the father does not provide for his children. A four years' investigation has proven to us in Franklin County, that this form of neglect is an enormous factor in the cause of juvenile delinquency. You can see that if the father does not or will not provide, the mothers must do so—usually at the wash tub—away from home, leaving the children without proper care or oversight. Here we get our truant-from-school cases, and following that, other delinquencies.

In Ohio, a father is compelled by state law to support his children under the age of 17 years. He is brought before the Court, given a suspended sentence and fine, and is placed on the adult probation list. He has to report at the Court office every Monday evening and bring his money. He is given a receipt for it, and on Saturday morning his wife calls at the office, gets the money, and gives us a receipt for the same. In January last, I handled in this class over one thousand dollars. Now, if a man falls down on this chance,—will not work, or will not bring his money in,—he is again brought before the Court and the original sentence ordered enforced; and we usually hurry that specimen of fatherhood off to the workhouse on a quick run. While he is an inmate of the workhouse, his earnings support his children. The chief probation officer collects from the county treasury forty cents a day, which is given to the wife.

There are many phases of the working of a Juvenile Court which I have not touched upon in this paper. I might go on and tell you stories all night and still have plenty of untold real stories of real folks I met during my little journey of four years into the political world.

To finish, let me tell you of a ten-year-old John who, when asked whose boy he was, replied, "I've belonged to an awful lot of folks already. I guess I'm God's boy—that's what one woman said—and I'm awful tired. I've just gone all me life long to pick up coal on the railway tracks, and I've carried in wash water and emptied it out again. I'm tired of being *just God's boy*. I wish someone would be a mother to me for a little while."